

**The Whole City Was in Turmoil** Timothy L. Carson  
**Matthew 21:1-10** April 9, 2017

By the time we get to the story today Jesus and his disciples had been on the road traveling for a long time. They were making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual observance of the Passover, a festival that drew thousands of people from the known Jewish world. The Holy City, also the political the capitol, was packed with teeming crowds. If you've ever been in the old walled city of Jerusalem even in ordinary times you experience the compression as many people flow through the restrictive gates into the contained area.

Not only were there large crowds; it was also a tinder box of anxiety. Festivals were the notorious locales of great protests in which people spoke against the ruling Roman occupation. Imagine the large squares of people scattered across the cities of the Mediterranean during Arab Spring. These protests often ended badly with great violence and loss of life.

The Roman soldiers were vigilant as they surveyed the crowds. The Temple authorities desperately wanted to keep the peace.

That was the supercharged atmosphere Jesus and his followers entered. Anything they did would be monitored very closely.

Where did they stay during the Passover? Well, not inside the city; that's where the rich folks stayed, in city accommodations. Rather, Jesus and the disciples stayed where other poor pilgrims stayed, outside the city walls. Some simply camped out. Others stayed out in adjoining villages with family or friends. That's what Jesus did, in Bethany which is just the other side of the Mount of Olives. Do you know what the Hebrew word for Bethany means? *House of the Poor*. Jesus is staying in the poor house because he's a peasant. And Jesus is about to stage a peasant's protest. It would be like game day in Columbia. The well-heeled have their standing reservations at some cushy downtown hotel. Others stay outside the city in some Motel 6 or at a campground or with friends.

Matthew's Gospel gives you the impression that everything took place all at once: Jesus entered the city and went immediately to the Temple Mount for his protest. Not so in the earliest Gospel, Mark. In Mark we have them coming and going back and forth between Jerusalem and Bethany every night.

In fact, after the initial entrance into Jerusalem Jesus just goes up to the Temple Mount to case the place out for the demonstration he is orchestrating for the next day. Night is falling and the crowds are thinning – no respectable protestor would choose that time to make a statement about anything. No, you conduct your demonstration in daylight when a crowd is gathered. So they go back to Bethany to stay the night.

There are two protests this week, two pieces of street theater, and they take aim at two institutions. The first is Empire; the Roman occupation. The second is the Temple cult and the corrupt priesthood for whom Jesus had nothing but contempt. He has two stage plays to deliver, one for each.

The first day is targeted at Empire. This is, after all, the nation's capital, and it is occupied. There is no limit to the hard power Rome will use to keep control.

And what do Jesus and the disciples have? Not hard power. In fact, they *mock* hard power by putting on this little counter play. At the same time that Pilate arrives from the West with chariot, horses and armor, Jesus arrives on donkey from the East accompanied by the chanting of Psalm 118. Hosanna to who? Well, the Son of David, the new Davidic King. But what kind of king is this? What kind of power is this?

This is a moral power, the kind that comes with common people staging a demonstration and mocking the false brutal power of empire. He can ride in on a donkey and the people adore him. And all without firing so much as a BB gun.

But that was just the first demonstration. In Mark that's enough for one day.

They go back to Bethany and re-group and prepare for day two and the next demonstration. If the first street drama took aim at Empire the second would put the Temple in its sights.

Remember how Jesus responded to his country bumpkin disciples spellbound by the large and ornate Temple? The Temple is falling, he said, but he can put it back together in three days. Of course there is a double meaning, the physical temple and also the temple of his own body.

But this Jerusalem Temple has become infected by a religious elite that preys on the widows, orphans and the poor. It exploits them. It colludes with occupying gentile regime. When Jesus mounts this protest he goes right into the court of the gentiles, the outer courts where Roman coin is changed for Jewish Shekels and animals are purchased to make sacrifices. He then quotes Jeremiah about making the Temple into a den of thieves. Over went the tables in a fine piece of prophetic theater. The religious authorities were mortified. The Roman soldiers were at the ready. This is not good.

And it was most likely the beginning of the end for this radical from the sticks of Galilee. They had seen such revolutionaries before. Such things do not pass unnoticed.

The way that this story is often interpreted is that Jesus was expressing righteous anger that that the sacred precincts had become so commercialized when the Temple was meant to create an atmosphere of devotion and worship. And that is true to an extent.

But what is more likely is that the two demonstrations Jesus orchestrated – one for the sake of Empire and the other for the sake of Temple – were actually connected because the two – Empire and Temple – were connected.

Just before this moment in the story someone presented Jesus with a coin of the realm and asked him about paying taxes, perfect timing when April 15 is just around the corner!

It is a trap, of course, for to say “yes” people should pay taxes to the oppressors is to be an absolute turncoat, but to say “no” to paying taxes is to spit in the eye of the principalities and powers.

So Jesus turns it around and asks *them* whose image is on the coin. The answer is of course the emperor. Pay the emperor only what is due, says Jesus, but pay God what *only belongs to God*. And don't confuse the two. They are not the same.

You see what the text has done? This is the overture, preparing us for the opening of the curtain on Jesus' street theater. This is not primarily an argument for why you should be a good citizen and pay your taxes. This is a clarification of whom you should serve and who or what deserves your obedience and loyalty.

The external authority of government is limited, contingent and relative, dependent on circumstances. You pay because they have authority for a season.

But you only give this government of the moment – especially an occupying force – what it requires and no more.

Give to God, however, your whole self – the things that belong only to God. Know that difference. Know what is your absolute source of moral authority and to whom you ultimately belong. Have that clear in your mind. Because otherwise, in the day of testing, you won't know what to decide or what to do.

The street theater Jesus orchestrated for Jerusalem – one for the sake of Empire and the other for the sake of the Temple – were actually connected, two sides of the same coin. Jesus rides into the capital city dominated by empire *and* the city of David the spiritual center - political and religious - and he critiques both – one by means of a donkey parade and the other by a turning-over-the-tables drama – and by doing so says that *neither of them* are expressions of the Kingdom of God.

The Roman Empire is not the Empire of God – remember that. In fact, the Empire of God can ride in on a donkey and with a gentle breath undo the kingdoms of this world.

And the Temple is not the Kingdom of God, in fact, it often *takes people away* from the real Kingdom. And sometimes you have to turn over the tables to make that perfectly clear.

Now do you understand why he got killed? He called into question the political structures and he called into question the religious structures. The elites of both went after him. And they both went after him together.

Next fall the men of the church are entering into a year-long study of the writings of German Pastor, theologian, and resister to the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is one of the Christian faith's examples of integrity and courage in the face of the tyranny of empire and faithlessness of the Church.

Bonhoeffer not only actively resisted Hitler and the evil of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich but also defied the state Lutheran church – its cowardice and complicity with Hitler's regime – and participated with the underground church.

It cost Bonhoeffer his life, of course. His unmasking of the powers of empire and his resistance to a church that acted cowardly spelled his demise. He neither sold out to the evil or to cowardice.

I wish I could say to you that practicing the Christian faith will simply bring you peace of mind, but it's not that easy. It does bring peace of mind but not of the complacent variety. It brings the peace on the other side of a risky faith when you stand for the right. It leads you into the city of empire wherever and whenever you find it, daring you to call into question any and all injustice, corruption and cowardice. It calls us to question the false claims of a religion that has sold out. That is dangerous business. But we have some great inspirations, not only Jesus and Bonhoeffer but a host of other saints from past and present.

The questions are these: Will we ride into the city of empire with an alternative parade and message? Will we resist the verdicts of empire when they run counter to our core convictions and faith? Will we dare pronounce that the empire of this world is not the empire of God? Will we decide to not settle for a church that has sold out, that simply reflects the mores that surround it?

If answers to any of these questions are yes then we probably belong with Jesus and his gang of street dramatists, making a statement about what is true and false, just and unjust, pleasing to God and not.

Waving palms like the crowd did is good as far as it goes; they were after all witnesses to the divine comedy. But it can never stop there. The harder things get the more the crowd dwindles. What we have to decide is who we are in this drama – the observers or part of the parade. If we're not a part of God's radical conga line the least we can do is get out of the way so God's purposes can unfold without our interference.

The most we can do is to take courage and critique empire with nothing more than donkeys and songs of the spirit.

The most we can do is to turn over the tables that trade the false stories of a shallow cultural Christianity, a faith that simply reflects the dominant values around it.

The most we can do is challenge falsehood with truth-telling, challenge hate by demonstrating loving-kindness, challenge unbridled power by practicing a servant leadership. None of this will protect us from those who wish to do us harm. But in the end it will protect and transform everything that matters, including us with a peace that passes all understanding, the transformation of our minds and hearts. And you can go to your bed in peace with that.

Ride on King Jesus. Ride on into the city that kills the prophets. Keep turning over the tables of every falsehood. And we will follow, if not today, then tomorrow.